

Interesting sightings from south-east Sierra Leone, including the first Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* for the country and the first evidence of Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris* for West Africa

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Observations intéressantes du sud-est du Sierra Leone, dont la première mention du Pipit rousseline *Anthus campestris* pour le pays et la première preuve concernant la présence de la Rousserolle verderolle *Acrocephalus palustris* pour l'Afrique de l'Ouest. L'auteur présente des observations faites dans les rizières de Kenema, au sud-est du Sierra Leone, en 2010, dont celle du premier Pipit rousseline *Anthus campestris* pour le pays, photographié le 20 janvier. Des photos sont présentées d'un *Acrocephalus* identifié comme une Rousserolle verderolle *A. palustris*; ceci constituerait la première preuve concernant la présence de cette espèce en Afrique de l'Ouest. Les autres espèces pour lesquelles des données sont fournies sont le Jacana nain *Microparra capensis*, la Rhynchée peinte *Rostratula benghalensis*, la Bécassine double *Gallinago media*, le Phalarope à bec large *Phalaropus fulicarius* et le Pipit à gorge rousse *Anthus cervinus*.

From November 2009 to November 2010, I lived in Kenema, south-east Sierra Leone. On the southern side of the town there is a large area of flooded rice paddies, which I visited fairly regularly, either alone or accompanied by Alhaji M. Siaka. During our year-round survey, we observed some African bird species rarely reported in Sierra Leone, as well as good numbers of Palearctic migrants, including the first Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* for Sierra Leone and the first evidence of Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris* for West Africa. Details of our most noteworthy records, augmented by those of other observers, are presented below.

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*

On 20 January 2010, I briefly observed and photographed a pipit that I almost immediately identified as a Tawny Pipit, based on my previous experience with the species in Europe (Fig. 1). At first sight, the jizz, size, slim-bodied shape and overall sandy-coloured plumage were strongly reminiscent of *A. campestris*. Following further examination of a combination of plumage features such as the pale supercilium, dark loreal stripe, unstreaked crown and mantle, buff-white tips to the median coverts, whitish underparts and the relatively short hindclaw, I became rather confident that the bird was an adult Tawny Pipit. In particular, the short hindclaw eliminated similar-looking Palearctic species such as Richard's Pipit *A. richardi*. At least two other closely related



Figure 1. Adult Tawny Pipit / Pipit rousseline *Anthus campestris*, Kenema, Sierra Leone, 20 January 2010 (David Monticelli)

pipits are known to occur in this region, but the unstreaked upperparts were not a good match for Long-billed Pipit *A. similis*, which, moreover, is usually found in different habitat (rocky outcrops with sparse vegetation), while the overall sandy plumage was not as buffy as would be expected for Plain-backed Pipit *A. leucophrys*.

This observation represents the first documented record for Sierra Leone. It should be noted, however, that the known wintering range of Tawny Pipit includes the northern part of the West African sub-region, and there are numerous previous records in nearby countries

(Guinea, Ivory Coast, Ghana; see Borrow & Demey 2001), which makes it a good candidate for more frequent occurrence in Sierra Leone than currently reported.

Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*

On the evening of 11 November 2010, I noticed two warblers foraging in fallow land with tall herbs and scattered bushes (2–3 m high) at the margins of the flooded rice fields. The first was a Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*, but the second, rather elusive bird appeared different and was heard to utter a short hard *chrek*. Initially, it was reminiscent of a reed warbler (either Eurasian *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* or African *A. baeticatus*), but the overall plumage was not as warm brown as would be expected for these species (Figs. 2–3). Both Western *Hippolais opaca* and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers *H. pallida* were also considered, but the long undertail-coverts typical of *Acrocephalus* species, rather pale yellowish-brown legs (not bluish grey) and overall olive-brown appearance tended to eliminate both *Hippolais* species. A third option, Marsh Warbler *A. palustris*, crossed my mind, but despite my familiarity with this species in Europe I left the area with serious doubts as to the bird's identity, especially given that Marsh Warbler is a Palearctic migrant wintering in East Africa (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1987), and hence is not to be expected in Sierra Leone or this part of the African continent.

After returning to Belgium a few days later, I sought the opinions of members of the Belgian Rarities Committee and other specialists.

Features visible in the photographs indicative of a first-winter Marsh Warbler (*cf.*, e.g., Beaman & Madge 1998, Kennerley & Pearson 2010) are (1) overall 'rounded' appearance, with rounded head and rather strong bill; (2) olive-brown upperparts, with yellowish-buff flanks, whitish chin and throat with buffy tinge; (3) long primary projection with eight visible primary tips; and (4) pale yellowish-brown legs and short, pale claws. The long primary projection rules out similar small warblers, such as African Reed Warbler, which has a short wing and a short primary projection. Similarly, the absence of a conspicuous pale supercilium and the long primary projection eliminate Paddyfield Warbler *A. agricola* (Kennerley & Pearson 2010), a species unknown in West Africa. Eurasian Reed Warbler is more difficult to separate but should typically be warmer toned, with buffier flanks and darker legs / claws.

David Pearson commented: "...these photos are very convincing. The head and bill shape are exactly right, as are the olive upperparts and yellowish-buff underparts. The yellowish-brown legs and palish claws also fit perfectly. It looks from its general plumage like a first-winter bird, and this seems to be confirmed by the pale primary tips. This being so the leg colour should rule out Eurasian Reed, the only real confusion



Figures 2–3. Marsh Warbler / Rousserolle verderolle *Acrocephalus palustris*, Kenema, Sierra Leone, 11 November 2010 (David Monticelli)

source. My view is that this is a first-winter Marsh Warbler”.

Marsh Warbler breeds mainly in temperate Europe (from eastern France to Russia, north to Sweden and south to Greece and Turkey) and western Asia. It is a long-distance migrant to East Africa, travelling along a very narrow route, including Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda to reach its winter quarters further south, from Tanzania to South Africa (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1987, Thorup & Rabol 2001). There is no previous record for Sierra Leone (Atkinson *et al.* 2011) and of the 22 countries included in the West African sub-region, vagrants have been claimed only from Senegal and Nigeria (Borrow & Demey 2001). However, these few records are insufficiently documented to eliminate closely related species (R. Demey *in litt.* 2011).

Other noteworthy records

Lesser Jacana *Microparra capensis*

One on 8 May 2010. Also one on 7 June 2008 (A. Siaka *in Bull. ABC* 15: 275). Only one previous record is mapped for Sierra Leone in Borrow & Demey (2001).

Greater Painted-snipe *Rostratula benghalensis*

At least a pair present on 8 May and through May–June 2010 (Fig. 4). Also one on 13 March 2008 (R. Demey *in litt.* 2011) and one on 15 December 2009 (J. Caddick & D. Hoddinott *in litt.* 2010). Considered to be an intra-African migrant in

Sierra Leone, but there are no previously published records (Dowsett 1993, Atkinson *et al.* 2011).

Great Snipe *Gallinago media*

One to four present in November–February 2010 (e.g., one on 12 February: N. Borrow *in Bull. ABC* 17: 248). Previous records include four on 6 December 2007 (D. Hoddinott *in Bull. ABC* 15: 136), two on 12–13 March 2008 (R. Demey & A. Siaka *in Bull. ABC* 15: 275) and five on 15 December 2009 (J. Caddick & D. Hoddinott *in litt.* 2010). Apparently a few Great Snipe are regularly present in November–March each year at this site, at least since 2008 (A. Siaka pers. comm.). No previous precise records for Sierra Leone, although the species was known from the country: Field (1974) mentions it occurs on inland marshes and Bouet (1955) reports it was shot near the Guinea border in January–February.

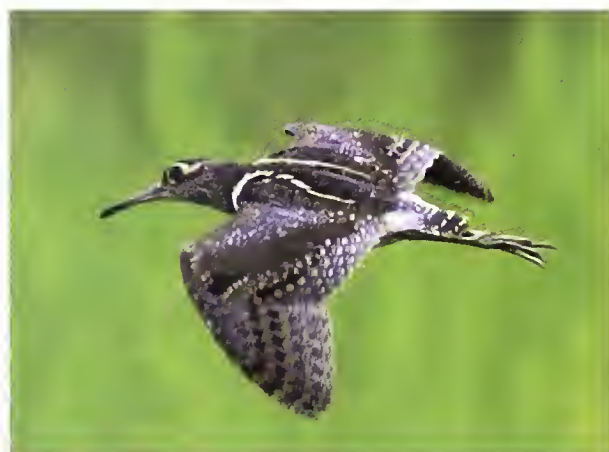


Figure 4. Male Greater Painted-snipe / Rhynchée peinte *Rostratula benghalensis*, Kenema, Sierra Leone, 8 May 2010 (David Monticelli)

Figures 5–6. Red Phalaropes / Phalaropes à bec large *Phalaropus fulicarius*, Kenema, Sierra Leone, 13–14 March 2010 (David Monticelli)

Red Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius*

Two photographed on 13–14 March 2010 (Figs. 5–6). Only two previous records mapped for Sierra Leone, along the coast, in Borrow & Demey (2001).

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*

One to three present in November–February 2010 (e.g., three on 12 February 2010: N. Borrow in *Bull. ABC* 17: 248). Also one on 12 March 2008 (R. Demey in *litt.* 2011) and four on 15 December 2009 (J. Caddick & D. Hoddinott in *litt.* 2010). Only one previous record for Sierra Leone: two at Freetown on 1 February (no year given: Field 1974).

Other Palearctic migrants commonly present in and around the Kenema rice fields in November–March included Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*, Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*, Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*, Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*, Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*, Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*, Eurasian Reed Warbler and Willow Warbler.

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